

## WORLDLY & SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF MAKAR SANKRĀNTI

### Worldly meaning

Sankrānti is derived from the word *sankraman*, meaning movement. Sankranti is the movement of the sun from one zodiac sign to another. Given that we daily see the sunlight emerging from the east (sunrise) and fading in the west (sunset) we erroneously believe the sun as moving around whereas in fact it is the planets and constellation which revolves round the sun.

### Makar Sankranti (*Uttarāyana*)

Celebrated in the month of Pausa, i.e. on 14 January, it is a festival based on astronomy. The term *Uttarāyana* is derived from two different Sanskrit words ‘*uttara*’ (North) and ‘*ayana*’ (movement) thus indicating a relational northward movement of the Sun on the celestial sphere. This apparent movement is due to the tilting of our planet, the earth at about 23 degrees on its axis.

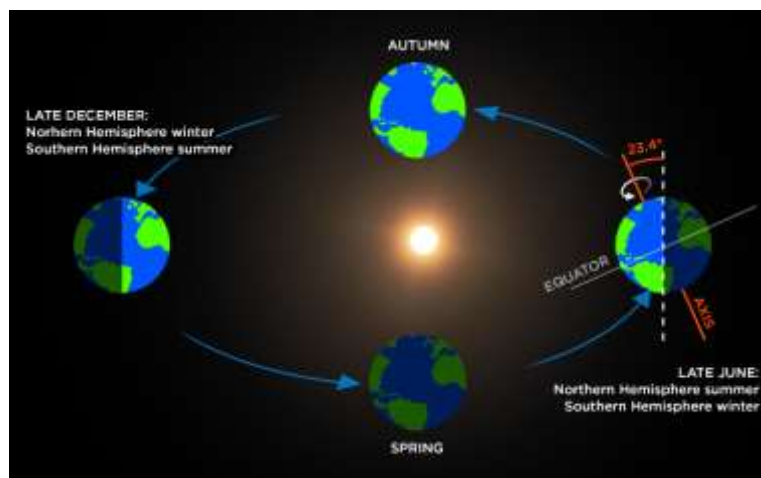
*Uttarāyana*, i.e. the period between Makara Sankrānti and Karka Sankrānti and begins to occur a day after the solstice in December (22 December) and continues for a six-month period through to the next solstice (21 June 21). Due to the tilting of our planet Earth we also perceive the sun to be moving away from the southern hemisphere into the northern hemisphere. In fact it is the northern hemisphere of the globe which starts to be more exposed to sunlight (longer daylight hours and shorter nights.) Concurrently the southern hemisphere starts to receive less sunlight (shorter days and longer nights). We thus perceive the sun moving.

*Dakshināyana* , the complement of *Uttarāyana*

*Dakshināyana* is the period between Karka Sankrānti and Makar Sankrānti (22 June to 21 December). Due to the tilting of the earth we thus perceive the sun to be moving away from the northern hemisphere into the southern hemisphere. In fact during *Dakshināyana* the southern hemisphere of the globe which starts to be more exposed to sunlight (longer daylight hours and shorter nights.) Concurrently the northern hemisphere starts to receive less sunlight (shorter days and longer nights).

*Dakshināyan*

*Uttarāyan*



*Dakshināyan*

*Uttarāyan*

### Why Makar Sankranti?

Makar is a zodiac sign and Sankranti means evolution movement. India is famous for its eminent astronomers who explored the Milky Way and other constellations. They were among the

first to affirm that the earth revolves round the sun from one Rashi (Zodiac) sign to another. When the revolution starts in Capricorn, the festival of Makar Sankranti is celebrated. The earth revolves for thirty days in this Rashi.

There is one Sankranti in each of the twelve Rashis, total of 12 annually. The twelve Rashis have been names as follows: *Mesha* (aries), *Vrishabha* (Taurus), *Mithun* (Gemini), *Karka* (Cancer), *Simha* (Leo), *Kanyā* (Virgo), *Tulā* (Libra), *Vrishchika* (Scorpion), *Dhanu* (Sagittarius), *Makar* (Capricorn), *Kumbha* (Aquarius) and *Meena* (Pisces).

Makar Sankranti marks the beginning of the *Saur Varsha* (Solar Year) and Uttarayana, the start of a period of increasing day light in the Northern Hemisphere.

### **Spiritual meaning**

The synonym for *sankraman* is *gati*. The *dhātupātha* or Sanskrit root word describes *gati* as *Jnāna* (knowledge, cognitive event which becomes known when experienced), *gamana* (movement, progress) and *prāpti* (acquisition, attaining goals.)

### **Jnāna (knowledge)**

Astronomy is worldly knowledge (*aparā vidyā*). The underlying spiritual meaning is knowledge inseparable from the total experience of reality, i.e. self-realisation and God-realisation which is achieved through the acquisition of spiritual knowledge (*parā vidyā, tatva jnāna*.)

### **Gamana (movement, progress)**

The practical application of such knowledge will empower us to realise the goals of human life, namely - *Dharma* (a virtuous living), *Artha* (acquisition of material treasures), *Kāma* (using the material treasures to uplift the physical, moral and spiritual welfare of the self as well as of others) and *Moksha* (liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth and death to enjoy the bliss of God.)

### **Prāpti (attaining goals)**

Walking the talk, maintaining a perfect harmony between our thoughts (*manasā*), our speech (*vāchā*) and actions (*karmanā*) is achievable only when we tread on the *shreya mārga* or path already paved by our rishis (seers of yore.)

*Sa tu dirdha kāla nairantaira satkāṛāsevito dridha bhumih* (Yog Darshan 1.14) We need to be focused, strong-willed, persevere over long time, regular and be committed. When that practice is done for a long time, without a break, and with sincere devotion, then the practice becomes a firmly rooted, stable and solid foundation. Only then we shall attain the finality as enunciated in the prayer ‘*mrityur māmritam gamaya*’, i.e. from death we shall move towards immortality - Moksha.

The choice is ours: either be content with the worldly meaning of festivals or delve into the spiritual aspects and uplift our spiritual standards. As a prudent driver we shall safely reach our destination whereas reckless driving will lead us to the gutters.

## **CELEBRATIONS OF MAKAR SANKRANTI**

### **Kite flying**

Makar Sankranti or Uttarayana (January 14) brings the northern belt of India, in particular Gujarat alive with the immense flutter of kites. This festival has attracted kite flyers from various

countries, who fly to India to enjoy the kite flying experience as well as add their touch by their own 'creations'. Gujarat even hosts an annual International Kite Flying Competition, adding an extra dimension to kite flying festival.

The preparations go in full swing since mid-December. Children bring a whiff of excitement as they spend their spare time practicing for the big day. The cotton threads (*Manjhas*) are coated with glass, rice, paste, chemicals and other abrasive material adding to the tensile strength. Cutting edges are seen in every street corner rolling the *manjhas* on spools (*firkis*). Artisans make the kites, utilizing paper and bamboo.

The brilliant colours signify hope, its size in relation to the sky symbolizes the minuteness of Man in front of the Almighty and its thread reminds us that the rope of our life is fragile. When He lets go, life ends.

### **Prayers**

The grace of God is invoked through fervent prayers, so that everyone may be blessed with a good times. Many also seize this opportunity to indulge in various practices like (i) bathing at the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna in Allahabad at dawn; (ii) adding sesame to savouries; (iii) wearing new clothes; and (iv) visit to family members, friends and relatives.

### **Khichri festival**

Makar Sankranti is also known as the Khichri festival in the north on India. It's also peak winter and Khichri, a mixture of rice, various pulses (*dāl*) and sesame which energises the whole body. Sesame sweets (laddoo, chiki, ec.) are also prepared. Sesame oil is used to massage the body before the morning bath and prayers. It is also customary in certain regions to offer gifts to parents, friends and relatives on this occasion.

### **Lohri**

Lohri is celebrated in Punjab on 13 January and marks the end of the sowing season of rabi crop, that is now ready to be harvested.

The traditional holy fire is lit. People gather around the bonfire, clapping hands, offering prayers and grains, sesame seeds, sweets to the fire. The Lohri feast is prepared by using ingredients from winter crops including mustard greens, sugarcane, radish, groundnuts, etc. The dishes include *makki ki roti* (flatbreads prepared from corn flour) and *sarso ka sāg* (a spicy Indian preparation made from mustard greens).

The two dishes are served together, with jaggery (*gur*) and/or homemade ghee (clarified butter) made from cow's milk. Another traditional dish of the harvest festival is the sesame rice or *til bhāt* that is rice made with sesame seeds and jaggery.

### **Veneration of Cows**

In certain regions of India (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar) the veneration of cows is another feature in the celebrations of Makar Sankranti. Bulls and cows are given a bath, their horns painted, and decorated with beautiful and fascinating flowers, garlands, and twinkling bells, these animals are then taken out in the villages.

It is common belief that Sankranti augurs the New Year of Hindus. In fact Indian Calendar (*Panchang*) spells out that New Year starts on Chaitra Shukla Pratipada (1<sup>st</sup> day of the bright moon half of the month of Chaitra, March or April) also known as Yugādi (Yug+ādi, start of a new era).

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